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Issues of Cultural Awareness in Curriculum Design

Catherine Yamamoto

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“Clearly, developing curriculum that encourages multicultural awareness, when educators and social scientists cannot agree on a standard criteria for multiculturalism, means challenges for everyone involved in multicultural education.”

The mandate for creating more multicultural awareness within curriculum has focused attention on the need for identifying the meaning, constituent parts and scope of culture. If curriculum is going to qualify as being "multicultural," it must, by definition, address the issues of multiple cultures. In order to address multiculturalism within education, instructional designers and curriculum developers must answer some difficult questions. What is culture? Why do various academic disciplines and levels define multiculturalism so differently? What does culture encompass - should it be limited to elements associated with ethnicity, national origin and spirituality (race, religion, value systems, etc.); or should it include such areas as gender, language, sexual orientation, age, marital status and able-bodiedness? How can curriculum content reflect multiculturalism as it pertains to specific issues within individual cultures, without perpetuating stereotypes or displaying bias toward another culture? Although there are no definitive answers to these questions presently, this presentation is directed at opening a discussion of possibilities that may be used to establish some guidelines for future curriculum design.

The first, and maybe most difficult, stage in bringing about cultural awareness is defining exactly what is included within the scope of culture. Most people would agree with a general definition that culture is a set of attitudes, values, beliefs and behaviors shared by a group of people and communicated from one generation to the next. This definition allows for culture to include eating habits, spiritual practices, family values, educational values, clothing, language and attitudes concerning land, government, money and gender roles. However, there is nothing within this definition that establishes what "labels" can or should be used to determine what is meant by a "group of people."

Consequently, different academic disciplines and levels of education have established their own "appropriate" categories for determining cultural identity. For example, educational standards for high school multicultural curricula center almost exclusively on race and ethnicity; therefore, "a group of people" refers to those who share certain racial and ethnic characteristics (skin color, hair texture, facial features, stature, etc.). College curriculum, on the other hand, expands multicultural studies to include issues concerning gender, religion and/or spiritual practices, language, able-bodiedness and sexual orientation, as well as race and ethnicity. So for colleges, multicultural awareness involves differentiating among a large variety of combinations within these categories.

In order to reflect multiculturalism across the curriculum, instructional designers must strive to focus on pertinent issues within each of the categories listed

above, while avoiding stereotyping anyone" group of people." For example, can statistics pointing out the disproportionate number of young, African American males within the criminal justice system be covered in a social issues course without perpetuating the stereotype of black males as being violent criminals? How should a health course address the issue of AIDS within the gay male population without adding to the myth that AIDS is a "gay disease?"

Curriculum designers must remain sensitive to cultural differences in fundamental beliefs while preparing students for standardized exams that often test students' knowledge only on the "established facts." Should a biology course teach evolution, biblical creationism and aboriginal creation stories as equally credible theories so as not to offend any cultural group? Whose point of view should be dominant in an American history course's coverage of the Cherokee removal- Andrew Jackson or the Cherokee nation?

Clearly, developing curriculum that encourages multicultural awareness, when educators and social scientists cannot agree on standard criteria for multiculturalism, means challenges for everyone involved in multicultural education. Thus creating, within educational systems, multiculturalism that can be applied in the "real world" places an enormous burden on those interested in multicultural issues - to help set guidelines that will foster a better understanding of all people.

PRESENTER:

Catherine Yamamoto is an Instruction Design Specialist at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln. She received her bachelors and masters degrees from UNL. She has taught secondary social studies and English, and was a lecturer in freshman composition at the University of New Mexico in Albuquerque for the fall semester before returning to Nebraska to become the Department Head of the Liberal Arts program at Gateway College in Omaha. After Gateway closed in the fall of 1996, she began working as an Instructional Designer for the CLASS project in the Research and Development Unit within the Department of Distance Education in the Division of Continuing Studies at UNL. She became an Instruction Design Specialist within CLASS in 1998, and she has been instrumental in writing, designing and coordinating several courses, including Health Science 1 and 2, American History 1 and 2, Learning Fundamentals (Learning Skills) and Introduction to Psychology. She also contributed to courses in Multicultural Studies, American Government - National Level and Reading, and she helped develop a public service site on the conflict in Kosovo. Currently, she is revising a Multicultural Studies course and designing and coordinating a Social Issues Ethnology course.